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Sent: 8/14/2018 8:04:55 PM
To: Bolen, Brittany [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=31e872a691114372b5a6a88482a66e48-Bolen, Brit]
Subject: Afternoon Energy: PJM seeks capacity auction delay — Former EPA staff slam 'secret science' proposal — More comments on cost-benefit

By David Beavers and Garrett Ross | 08/14/2018 04:03 PM EDT

With help from Emily Holden, Annie Snider and Daniel Lippman

PJM SEEKS CAPACITY AUCTION DELAY: PJM Interconnection filed a request with FERC today to delay its next capacity auction from May to August 2019, Pro's Darius Dixon reports. The move was prompted by FERC's June order declaring the market was unjust and unreasonable, and it didn't come as a surprise, since that order said such a delay was possible.

"We recognize that modifying the PJM capacity market as discussed herein would be a significant undertaking and that the next Base Residual Auction is scheduled to occur in May 2019. Accordingly, we note that PJM may file requests for waiver or other relief, as appropriate," the June 29 order states.

PJM must draft new rules that will need to be approved and potentially revised by FERC early next year. Read more here.

Welcome to Afternoon Energy! We're your hosts Garrett Ross and David Beavers. Send suggestions, news and tips to gross@politico.com, dbeavers@politico.com, mdaily@politico.com and njuliano@politico.com, and keep up with us on Twitter at [@garrett_ross](https://twitter.com/garrett_ross), [@davidabeavers](https://twitter.com/davidabeavers), [@dailym1](https://twitter.com/dailym1), [@nickjuliano](https://twitter.com/nickjuliano), [@Morning_Energy](https://twitter.com/Morning_Energy) and [@POLITICOPro](https://twitter.com/POLITICOPro).

FORMER EPA STAFF SLAM 'SECRET SCIENCE' PROPOSAL: The Environmental Protection Network, a group launched in January 2017 by former EPA staff, submitted comments to the agency today blasting the agency's proposal to restrict the use of scientific studies that contain non-publicly available data. "The impacts of this devastating proposal, should it be finalized, will fall on the most vulnerable in our country, including children (whose lungs are only just developing), asthma sufferers, older Americans, and people with heart and lung disease," the group writes. "When a federal agency proposes to make such massive changes, it has a legal obligation to explain clearly the purpose of the changes and justify them, following well-established legal standards. This proposal completely fails to make the case for why the changes are needed."

MORE COMMENTS ON COST-BENEFIT: A coalition of 13 state attorneys general and state environmental agency officials led by New York AG Barbara Underwood submitted a comment letter urging the EPA to abandon its proposed changes to how it performs cost-benefit analyses of regulations before Monday's comment deadline. In its comments, the group says the agency's notice of proposed rulemaking "signals yet another unsupported attempt to undermine EPA's mission to protect public health and the environment."

EXPANDING THE BATTLEFIELD: With the state pushing back on the Trump administration's auto emissions rollbacks, California industry leaders are beginning to plot new ways to curb environmental impacts, Bloomberg News reports. "'We're looking at other ways to reduce pollution by regulating either the purchase or use of cars and light trucks that don't involve setting standards on the vehicles themselves,' Mary Nichols, the head of the California Air Resources Board, said in an interview. 'That could be a whole bunch of things. Limits

on registrations. Fees and taxes.' The only impediment would be convincing residents to foot the bill. So far, 60 percent of the state's likely voters think emissions standards should go higher, even though most expect that fighting climate change will boost gasoline prices, according to a Public Policy Institute of California poll released last month. Just over half say they'd pay more for electricity from renewable sources." Read more [here](#).

IN 5 YEARS TIME: Even though the past four years have been the warmest ever recorded, a new study released today is projecting that the next five years will be "anomalously warm," The Washington Post reports. "'What we found is that for the next five years or so, there is a high likelihood of an anomalously warm climate compared to anomalously cold,' said Florian Sevellec, a scientist at France's National Center for Scientific Research, who co-authored the study published in Nature Communications with Sybren Drijfhout of the University of Southampton in the United Kingdom. ... It's important to underscore that the result is a forecast based on probability — not a certain outcome." The study forecast a 58 percent chance that the Earth's overall temperature from 2018 through 2022 will be "anomalously warm," and a 69 percent chance that the Earth's oceans will be. That also includes "a dramatic increase of up to 400 percent for an extreme warm event" during 2018 to 2022, it said. Read more [here](#).

SWAMP WATCH: American Ethane Company [terminated](#) its lobbying contract with Bold Strategies, following a [report](#) from E&E News that the company is nearly 90 percent owned by a trio of Russian oligarchs, including one with ties to alleged spy Mariia Butina. E&E made the discovery after Bold Strategies revised its lobbying forms to show American Ethane's foreign owners. Bold Strategies did not return a separate request for comment from POLITICO.

— **Swiss offshore drilling contractor** Transocean hired a pair of lobbyists at Miller & Chevalier to assist the company with "collection of debt from Nigerian Petroleum Development Company Ltd., including outreach to U.S. Embassy in Abuja," per a disclosure [filing](#).

MOVERS, SHAKERS: Byron Brown, former EPA deputy chief of staff for policy whose [last day](#) at the agency was Friday, has landed at international law firm Crowell & Moring. Brown will be a senior counsel in the firm's Environment & Natural Resources and Government Affairs groups.

— **The Solar Energy Industries Association** announced the hiring of two executives today: John Smirnow, to be general counsel and vice president of market strategy; and Tony Chen, to be SEIA's first vice president of business development. Smirnow, who previously served as SEIA's vice president of international trade, has most recently worked in private trade and customs law practice. Chen's previous solar industry experience includes stints at Cool Earth Solar and SolarCity.

QUICK HITS:

— "The Key to Big Profits in Clean Energy: Animal Fats," [Wall Street Journal](#).

— "Ford Fights Back Against Wall Street Calls to Cut Its Dividend," [Bloomberg](#).

— "SunPower pivots to 'solar energy services' upon existing utility-scale development," [Greentech Media](#).

— "Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan sues Trump Tower for violating clean water laws intended to protect Chicago River fish," [Chicago Tribune](#).

WIDE WORLD OF POLITICS:

— Trump campaign [files for arbitration](#) against Omarosa

— Wisconsin Democrats jump at chance to finally beat Walker

— Handler of alleged spy Butina tied to suspicious U.S.-Russia exchange program

To view online:

<https://subscriber.politicopro.com/newsletters/afternoon-energy/2018/08/pjm-seeks-capacity-auction-delay-316664>

Stories from POLITICO Pro

PJM seeks 3-month delay to capacity auction [Back](#)

By Darius Dixon | 08/14/2018 12:50 PM EDT

PJM Interconnection is asking FERC for permission for a three-month delay its next capacity auction to August 2019 in light of FERC's June order declaring the market was unjust and unreasonable, according to a [filing today](#).

The one-time delay from May to August is warranted, PJM says, because of the "unique circumstances" created by FERC's order. PJM now faces a short window of time to draft new rules that must be approved and potentially revised by FERC by early January.

PJM said that the delay would push back the need for a final order from FERC until March 15.

Today's request does not come as a surprise since FERC's order said that such a delay was possible.

"We recognize that modifying the PJM capacity market as discussed herein would be a significant undertaking and that the next Base Residual Auction is scheduled to occur in May 2019. Accordingly, we note that PJM may file requests for waiver or other relief, as appropriate," the June 29 [order states](#).

That order was FERC's most significant move into a long-simmering conflict over state-level energy incentives for nuclear power and renewable energy, and it was approved by FERC, on a 3-2 vote.

WHAT'S NEXT: Initial responses from PJM and others to FERC order are due in two weeks. However, the Organization of PJM States has requested an extension that PJM itself endorsed.

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EPA's deputy chief of staff to depart [Back](#)

By Emily Holden and Alex Guillén | 08/09/2018 09:09 AM EDT

Byron Brown, EPA's deputy chief of staff for policy, will depart the agency Friday.

Brown was among the EPA staffers who had formerly worked for Sen. [Jim Inhofe](#) (R-Okla.), a list that also includes acting Administrator Andrew Wheeler and chief of staff Ryan Jackson. Brown previously was senior counsel on the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee.

At EPA, Brown worked on the rollback of Obama-era coal ash regulations and on efforts to streamline permitting.

"Byron has been with EPA since day one of the Trump Administration and has been an invaluable member of our staff. We wish him the best on his future endeavors and thank him for his dedication and hard work implementing President Trump's agenda." Wheeler said in a statement.

It was Brown's third stint at the agency, according to his LinkedIn profile. His wife works as a lobbyist for oil and gas company Hess Corporation.

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Trump campaign files for arbitration against Omarosa [Back](#)

By Rebecca Morin | 08/14/2018 11:51 AM EDT

Donald Trump's presidential campaign has filed for arbitration proceedings against former White House aide Omarosa Manigault Newman after she released a tell-all book from her time on the president's 2016 campaign and in the White House.

The move is the latest escalation between the former "Apprentice" star and the president, who has labeled Manigault Newman "wacky," "deranged" and a "dog" in posts to his Twitter account this week.

"Donald J. Trump for President, Inc. has filed an arbitration against Omarosa Manigault-Newman, with the American Arbitration Association in New York City, for breach of her 2016 confidentiality agreement with the Trump Campaign," a campaign official said.

While Manigault Newman has said that she refused to sign the White House's non-disclosure agreement, she did acknowledge during an interview with PBS on Monday that she signed one for Trump's 2016 presidential campaign and another one in 2003 when she was on "The Apprentice."

Those other NDAs have been described as more restrictive than the White House agreement, with potentially more legal heft.

A copy of the Trump campaign NDA that was obtained by POLITICO included a non-disparagement clause to ensure staffers did not release information, confidential or detrimental, about Trump, his business, his family members including grandchildren, and even family members' companies.

Trump tweeted Monday that Manigault Newman had signed a non-disclosure agreement, but did not specify if it was for the White House or his campaign.

During an interview on MSNBC on Tuesday afternoon, Manigault Newman said she does not believe she violated her 2016 agreement.

"I don't believe that I have violated, but I will leave it to the lawyers to sort that out," she said during her first interview since the arbitration move was announced. "It's interesting that he is trying to silence me, what is he trying to hide or be afraid of?"

Press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders said during a Tuesday press briefing that she would not disclose whether she signed an NDA but said it was common practice to have employees sign those type of agreements.

"I'm not going to get into the back and forth on who has signed an NDA here at the White House," she said. "I can tell you that it's common in a lot of places for employees to sign NDAs, including in government, particularly anyone with a security clearance."

When later pressed that the act is common for corporations rather than for government, Sanders said the White House's policy is consistent with past administrations.

"It's also, despite contrary opinion, it's actually very normal, and every administration prior to the Trump administration has had NDAs, particularly specific for anyone that had a security clearance," she later added.

It is illegal for those with security clearances to share classified information, but they typically would not sign an NDA.

Manigault Newman has made several media appearances this week to promote her new book "Unhinged," in which she claims that Trump regularly used racial epithets and is a "racist, misogynist and bigot."

The president has countered Manigault Newman's claims with attacks launched via Twitter as well as from his cable-news surrogates,

"When you give a crazed, crying lowlife a break, and give her a job at the White House, I guess it just didn't work out. Good work by General Kelly for quickly firing that dog!" Trump tweeted Tuesday morning.

Manigault Newman continued to push back on Tuesday afternoon, saying that she will continue to blow the whistle on Trump to expose him as "the misogynist and bigot that he is."

She added that she had been interviewed by special counsel Robert Mueller for his Russia probe, but would not provide any details of what she was asked.

"I will say that there is a lot of corruption that went on in both the campaign and the White House, and I'm gonna blow the whistle on all of it," she said.

In a Tuesday interview with "CBS This Morning," the former reality star released a recording she took of herself and campaign officials Katrina Pierson and Lynne Patton discussing during the 2016 campaign how to respond to an inappropriate comment Trump had said, but did not specify what words he had used.

Manigault Newman said on CBS, which aired the recording Tuesday morning, that the three staffers were discussing an alleged recording of Trump using the n-word from his time hosting NBC's "The Apprentice."

Pierson said in a statement that the rumors about the alleged tape were "always being circulated by Omarosa and her alone."

"In her secret tape-recording of me, it was one of many times that I would placate Omarosa to move the discussion along because I was weary of her obsession over this alleged tape," she continued. "That discussion was nothing other than sifting through unconfirmed rumors regarding the Apprentice tape and the transcript supports my statement. Omarosa fabricated the story by conflating numerous discussions."

The president also pushed back on Manigault Newman's claim Monday evening, writing online that "there are NO TAPES of the Apprentice where I used such a terrible and disgusting word."

Sanders said on Tuesday, however, that she could not "guarantee" whether Trump had actually used that word and that "the president addressed this question directly."

"I can tell you that I've never heard it," she said. "I can also tell you that if myself or the people in this building serving this country every single day doing our very best to help people all across this country and make it better, if at any point we felt that the president was who some of his critics claim him to be, we certainly wouldn't be here."

Earlier this week, Manigault Newman also released a recording taken in the White House Situation Room of chief of staff John Kelly firing her. She also revealed a recording of Trump expressing his surprise that Manigault Newman was leaving the White House, though the former White House aide has contended that Trump knew that she going to be fired.

Manigault Newman was fired from the White House in December 2017 after a tumultuous tenure during which she served as the administration's highest-profile liaison to the African-American community.

During Tuesday's briefing, Sanders said that Trump did talk to Kelly about giving him full authority to let Manigault Newman go if they could not get along.

"The president wanted to give her a chance, and he made clear when General Kelly came on and he voiced concerns that this individual didn't have the best interests of the White House and the president and the country at heart, the president said do what you can to get along," Sanders said. "And if you can't, he gave him full authority to carry out the decision to let her go."

Annie Karni and Andrew Restuccia contributed to this report.

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Wisconsin Dems jump at chance to finally beat Walker [Back](#)

By Daniel Strauss | 08/14/2018 05:14 AM EDT

Wisconsin Democrats on Tuesday will choose from a field that once swelled to over a dozen candidates — an array of businessmen, state legislators, the mayor of Wisconsin's most liberal city and the chief of the state firefighters union — to realize their long-elusive goal of defeating Republican Gov. Scott Walker.

But the clear frontrunner is state education superintendent Tony Evers, a 66-year-old white man who stands out in a year when Democrats have put forward high numbers of women, young people and first-time candidates for office. What Evers lacks in sizzle, Democrats are hoping he compensates for with a record of clashes with Walker over education that could energize his party and deny the Republican governor a third term.

After years of doing battle with unions and pushing conservative legislation, Walker may be the one Republican who gets Wisconsin Democrats as agitated as President Donald Trump does. And that, say some Democratic officials in the state, might be enough in a year like this.

"If there's a rub on Tony Evers, it might be that he's too nice," said Joe Wineke, a former Wisconsin Democratic Party chairman. "But I'm not convinced Midwestern nice is going to be a bad thing in the year of Trump."

While talk of rolling back Walker's accomplishments has dominated the Democratic primary, Republicans have already sought to define the terms of the campaign. The Republican Party of Wisconsin has already focused attack ads on four candidates: Evers, former Wisconsin Democratic Party chairman Matt Flynn, former state Rep. Kelda Roys, and Professional Firefighters of Wisconsin President Mahlon Mitchell.

"I do think this is our big opportunity. This is a favorable year for Democrats. It's a year in which women candidates and women voters are more energized and are being more successful than ever in modern political history," said Roys.

The Democratic primary has hardly been the bareknuckle brawl one might expect from a big field in a divided state. But it has split money and endorsements over a broad range of candidates, leading the Democratic Governors Association to task an operative with building fundraising infrastructure for the eventual primary winner, to assure the nominee is able to compete with Walker's campaign machine. That has given an edge to Evers, who has been elected statewide three times since 2009.

"We had a gubernatorial primary that really didn't ever take off, and so for that reason Evers is a perfectly acceptable statewide figure who's probably going to win," said Democratic pollster Paul Maslin.

Evers has also embodied the anti-Walker mood, bashing Walker as "anti-education" and vowing to bring back funding for after school program and kindergarten in the next 2019 and 2021 budget.

"To beat Scott Walker we need a stronger vision for our future. Instead of investing a billion dollars in handouts to companies like Foxconn, I'm going to invest in our kids and our workers," Evers said in an ad. The narrator adds: "What's best for our kids is best for our state."

The biggest criticism aimed at Evers came from Matt Flynn, another primary candidate, who's argued that Evers, along with Mitchell and Roys, have run ineffective campaigns and would lose decisively against Walker in a general election matchup. Flynn has accused Evers of being a "politically naïve" candidate.

Mitchell, the labor leader, has rallied most of the other major Wisconsin unions to his side. He has run as a pragmatic liberal candidate who, as an African American, can appeal to minorities in the state and rally labor unions like no other candidate in the field.

But Roys, a former state representative, has highlighted her appeal to female voters with endorsements from Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-N.Y.) and her experience as the executive director of the NARAL Pro-Choice Wisconsin. Roys ran a celebrated primary ad that featured her breastfeeding her child.

As the Democrats have scrapped for votes within their party, Walker has been preparing for the sprint to the finish in the general election, amassing \$4.8 million already. Since it's never been completely clear who he will face in the general election, Walker and his team have worked to highlight his policy accomplishments, framing him as an education-focused governor, while also bashing as many of the Democratic candidates as possible.

"Scott Walker has delivered results and traveled the state tirelessly to share his vision with the people of Wisconsin, and now he's built a campaign to win," Walker senior adviser Brian Reisinger said in a statement. "Tens of millions of dollars in big government special interest money is lining up to distort his record of reform, but the governor will continue to offer a conservative model for others by running on his accomplishments and vision to keep Wisconsin working for generations to come."

Once there's a Democratic nominee, the contrast between Walker and the Democrat will crystallize, said Republican strategist Mark Graul.

"The governor has been in sort of a vacuum. Either you're for Scott Walker or you're not for Scott Walker. And after Tuesday I think it'll be 'either you're for Scott Walker or whether it be Evers or Roys or Mitchell,'" Graul said. "So there will be a clear contrast of what people's choices are going to be in November."

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Handler of alleged spy Butina tied to suspicious U.S.-Russia exchange program [Back](#)

By Josh Meyer | 08/14/2018 05:18 AM EDT

Six years before he was exposed for allegedly managing a covert agent on U.S. soil, the Russian politician Alexander Torshin hosted young Americans visiting Moscow as part of two cultural exchange programs, including one that has drawn the FBI's scrutiny.

The gregarious Torshin regularly hosted U.S. visitors in the ornate chambers of Russia's parliament, where he gushed about his love of guns, bourbon and America.

"He was friendly, traveled to the U.S. often and enjoyed sharing his experiences of visiting small-town America," recalls one participant who went on two trips sponsored by the Russian government.

A [photo](#) posted on Facebook by one of the exchange programs shows several young visitors, including the student body president of Princeton University, meeting with Torshin over tea and cookies. (The FBI is not known to have investigated that program. None of the students, or Torshin, has been accused of wrongdoing.)

It wasn't until years later that Torshin would emerge as a major figure in the Trump-Russia saga — a man whom federal prosecutors say oversaw the accused Russian operative Mariia Butina's efforts to infiltrate Republican Party circles, including the National Rifle Association, to push them toward more pro-Russia policies. Torshin himself has attended annual NRA meetings dating back to at least 2011.

Many of the first-class student exchanges were officially organized by the Russian Cultural Center in Washington, D.C., and included top-flight meals, airfare and hotel accommodations. But the center's exchange programs abruptly stopped in fall 2013, after FBI counterintelligence agents urgently located dozens of trip participants and told them the program was an elaborate cover for a Washington-based Russian spy recruiting effort.

The agents said the Russians had prepared dossiers on some of the most promising participants, two of the former students told POLITICO. They pressed for every detail of the program, including whom the students met, where they went and what they discussed. They also said that Russian government official who oversaw the program — from a mansion about a mile and a half from the White House — was a suspected spy and would be kicked out of the U.S. soon.

"They said they had a great degree of confidence that the trips were part of an effort to spot and assess future intelligence assets," the participant, a former student government leader and Russian-language student, said of the three FBI agents who questioned him for more than an hour. "They told us it was standard Russian spycraft."

The FBI's interest in that cultural exchange program for young American political and business leaders was reported at the time, including a single, passing reference to Torshin. But the details of his involvement in the exchanges is a new revelation, as is his participation in the second exchange program for student body presidents at American universities dating back to at least 2010.

The new detail fills out the picture of the Russian lawmaker — now deputy governor of his country's central bank — who is a longtime close ally of Russian President Vladimir Putin. It shows that Torshin's collaboration with Butina was not his first connection to a Kremlin-linked effort to recruit Americans, and underscores that covert Russian spy operations in the U.S. have been underway for years, well before Trump launched his 2016 presidential bid.

While Torshin is not identified by name in the Butina court filings, several sources close to the investigation told POLITICO he is the Russian official described as directing Butina's alleged efforts to establish "unofficial lines of communications with U.S. politicians and political organizations" and "to send reports, seek direction, and receive orders in furtherance of the conspiracy" from Moscow.

His name has also shown up in investigations by Congress, the Federal Election Commission and, reportedly, special counsel Robert Mueller, into Russia's attempts to interfere with the 2016 presidential election. Those include examinations of possible attempts to establish a back channel between Trump and Putin, as well as possible efforts to illegally funnel Russian campaign contributions to Trump.

But his meetings with American students earlier in the decade, coupled with the government's recent allegations in the Butina case, suggest that Torshin may be a more significant Kremlin operative, and for a longer time, than was previously understood.

"All of that needs to be explored now through the lens that Torshin is a handler for Russian intelligence operatives," said Max Bergmann, a State Department senior international security adviser in the Obama administration. "The suspicion has to be raised, given what is laid out in [the Butina] indictment, that this wasn't his first rodeo."

Torshin did not respond to requests for an interview, but has denied any wrongdoing related to the current investigations. The 29-year-old Butina, indicted by federal prosecutors in July, has pleaded not guilty to charges of acting as an illegal foreign agent — including, according to prosecutors, by using sex as a means of influence.

U.S. government Kremlinologists have tracked Torshin, 64, for years, at least since his first known visit to the U.S. in 2004.

As a rising star in Putin's United Russia Political party, Torshin became an ally of the Russian leader. Putin tapped him that same year to run a sensitive parliamentary investigation investigating the horrific terrorist siege of a school in the Russian town of Beslan; many observers considered the resulting report a whitewash that absolved Russian security forces.

By 2010, Torshin had become a leading United Russia voice in the Russian Duma, a trusted Putin aide on sensitive security issues and, most likely, a go-to ally for important missions that didn't fall under his official portfolio, according to Bergmann and other former officials.

Later that year, for instance, Torshin helped orchestrate a secret spy swap between the U.S. and Russia after the FBI arrested 10 Russian operatives who had been living undercover in America for years.

Also in 2010, Torshin met with a delegation of 15 student body presidents from American universities as part of an exchange program paid for, and sponsored by, a Russian government agency focused on "youth affairs."

Because the trip was designed to mirror a popular and high-profile congressional exchange program, the students were given a briefing by top White House and congressional Russia hands, including Michael McFaul, then the National Security Council's director for Russian affairs and later the U.S. ambassador to Russia.

On the conference call, which has not previously been reported, McFaul and others gave the students background about Russia — but also cautioned them to be on guard about unusual overtures, including from their Russian student counterparts, said one participating student who, like others interviewed for this article, spoke on the condition of anonymity because they fear the trips risk could taint their professional reputations. McFaul told POLITICO he doesn't recall the discussion, but his role in the pre-trip briefing was referenced in some university news releases at the time.

Thanks to the briefing, "we went in with our eyes open" about how, in Russia, even a friendly interest in sharing information or establishing long-term relationships, might not be what it seemed, the former student said. He added that the trip went smoothly and nothing appeared suspicious about meetings with Torshin and at least two other Putin allies connected to the current Trump-Russia saga.

The next March, Torshin met with another set of students on an exchange program organized through the same youth affairs agency, in the meeting posted on Facebook.

And the year after that, he met with older groups of young leaders sponsored by the Russian Cultural Center, according to the participant on two trips and another person who went on one exchange.

By the fall of 2013, the FBI was well into an investigation into that exchange program, and had come to believe it was a front for developing young Americans as assets, the two participants said. The D.C. chapter is just one of more than 80 Russian cultural and science centers in various countries that U.S. intelligence officials suspect of being a front for all manner of spy operations.

The cultural center trips were popular among well-connected young Washingtonians interested in spending a week in an exotic foreign country with everything, down to the visa application fee, covered by the sponsor.

But the young former student government leader, who went on two trips in 2012 and 2013, said the organizers also "recruited on their own and made the determination who to select."

"They had a specific type of person they were looking for," he said. "Future leaders."

When the FBI began contacting trip participants in late September and October of 2013, many were shocked at what the agents were telling them. The agents began by reading from a printed card with details of about what they were investigating, including how they believed Russian Cultural Center Director Yuri Zaitsev was overseeing the alleged spy recruitment operation, according to the two participants, both of whom shared details of their trips and FBI interviews with POLITICO.

The discussions were "very frank," according to one of the FBI's top counterintelligence officials at the time. The official said the agents' interviews were exhaustive, in part because Russian intelligence operatives excel at being unobtrusive and patiently laying the groundwork for relationships they hope to develop over years or even decades.

In hindsight, the second trip participant said there were indications that the group's extremely generous Russian hosts might have had ulterior motives.

During his interview, that participant told the FBI agents that he thought it was "unusual" that the group had been granted such high-level meetings, including with top-ranking officials from the Ministry of Foreign

Affairs. The agents were particularly interested in any details about those meetings, he said, "and why are these kids meeting with these super high-level people."

"It seemed like they were trying to foster the exchange in a professional and productive way," the second participant said. But, he added: "If one person out of a group of 20 becomes an asset for them, then I suppose it's worth it for them to pay the whole group for the trip."

After hearing from the FBI, some students backed out of the next scheduled trip. The former participant on two trips, who remains active in other efforts to promote U.S.-Russian relations, said he believed the FBI investigation — reported at the time by Mother Jones and the Washington Post — effectively ended the Russian Cultural Center exchange programs.

In all, the FBI believes that at least 125 people went on cultural exchange programs involving Zaitsev and the Russian Cultural Center, including grad students, non-governmental organization staffers, political aides to national and state officials and business executives. The former FBI official declined to comment on whether agents have investigated other cultural exchange programs, such as those sponsored by Moscow's youth affairs agency, that also included Torshin.

As Butina and Torshin allegedly ramped up their U.S.-based influence operation ahead of the 2016 presidential election, Butina attended numerous events at the Russian Cultural Center. She even met with the organization's director for a dinner that was caught on camera by FBI officials, as POLITICO recently reported.

That director was a suspected Russian intelligence operative just like his predecessor, Zaitsev, and also left the U.S. following FBI investigations, federal authorities allege in Butina's case. Both men denied wrongdoing.

Robert Driscoll, Butina's lawyer, scoffed at the notion that Torshin is a master spy, and said his client's connections to the Russian Cultural Center were merely social. He added that in his frequent talks with Butina, she has described Torshin as someone who genuinely has come to love America — especially Nashville, where the two attended an Alan Jackson country music concert while there for the NRA convention.

"My impression of him from knowing Mariia is that she viewed him as a mentor and as someone who was helpful to her, with her gun rights group and personally," Driscoll said. "He helped raise her profile, and she got to travel and attend different events with him."

The participant on two of the cultural trips said Torshin was especially popular with U.S. visitors, in part because he seemed most interested in small talk and sharing his tales of traveling to the far corners of the United States.

"He was always eager and happy to meet with Americans," he said.

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